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Review Essay

# The Tragedy of Cold War History

## Reflections on Revisionism

*John Lewis Gaddis*

It has been well over three decades now since the historian William Appleman Williams first called upon his colleagues in the profession to undertake "a searching review of the way America has defined its own problems and objectives, and its relationship with the rest of the world." In *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, surely one of the most influential books ever written about the history of U.S. foreign relations, Williams rejected the celebratory tone that had characterized earlier scholarship, insisting that the record of this nation's foreign policy had been a "tragedy" because of the gap Americans had allowed to develop between aspirations and accomplishments. We had preached self-determination but objected when others sought to practice it; we had proclaimed the virtues of economic freedom even as we sought to impose economic control. The result, Williams concluded, was that "America's humanitarian urge to assist other people is undercut—even subverted—by the way it goes about helping them."

The classical definition of tragedy is greatness brought low by some fundamental flaw in one's own character. When one considers the difficulties the United States created for itself through its own hubris and arrogance during the Vietnam War era, it is hardly surprising that Williams' tragic view of American diplomacy seemed, to a great many people at the time, to make sense. To a good many even today, it still does.

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Therein, however, lies a danger. Any view held by a considerable number of people risks becoming an orthodoxy, and there are signs that this has happened within the field of American diplomatic history. Williams was, according to those who knew him, a profoundly unorthodox character. I suspect that the last thing he would have wanted would have been to see his own ideas—or anybody else's, for that matter—become conventional wisdom. As he himself put it in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, "history is a way of learning, of getting closer to the truth. It is only by abandoning the clichés that we can even define the tragedy."

The end of the Cold War has obliged most of us to jettison any number of clichés, orthodoxies and long-cherished pearls of conventional wisdom; in this sense, we are all becoming post-Cold War revisionists. All the more reason, then, for taking another look into what Williams called the "mirror" of history, "in which, if we are honest enough, we can see ourselves as we are as well as the way we would like to be."[1]

#### THE AMERICAN VISION

Students frequently ask the question these days: what was the Cold War all about? Given what we now know of the Soviet Union's internal fragility; given what has long been clear about the economic absurdity of Marxism-Leninism; given persuasive evidence that an international communist monolith never really existed; given all of these things, what exactly was the threat to American interests anyway? Whatever could have justified the massive expenditures on armaments, the violations of human rights abroad and civil liberties at home, the neglect of domestic priorities, the threats to blow up the world—whatever could have excused all the deplorable things the United States did during the Cold War if no genuine threat ever existed? Doesn't this record only confirm what Williams suspected: that the American system has a propensity to fight cold wars, and that if the Soviet Union had not provided the necessary adversary, someone else would have?

Few historians would deny today that the United States did expect to dominate the post-World War II international system, and that it did so well before the Soviet Union emerged as a clear and present antagonist. Woodrow Wilson years earlier had provided the rationale, with his call for a collective security organization to keep the peace, and for self-determination and open markets as a way of simultaneously removing the causes of war. It took the fall of France and the attack on Pearl Harbor to transform Wilson's ideas into sustainable policy, to be sure, but the country's leadership, if not yet the country as a whole, was thoroughly committed to those ideas long before World War II ended.

This vision of the future assumed a strong military role for the United States. Americans would hardly have been prepared, even under the best of circumstances, to turn the entire task of peacekeeping over to the United Nations, however enthusiastically they endorsed

[1] William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, rev. ed., New York: Norton, 1988, pp. 13-16. The first edition of Williams' book was published in 1959.

that organization. And it is now clear that careful calculations of material advantage lay behind the international economic order created at Bretton Woods. No one had ever combined the fact of self-interest with the appearance of disinterest more skillfully than Woodrow Wilson, and that aspect of his legacy was still very much around as influential Americans set out to design the postwar world.[2]

But let us be fair to those designers: they also assumed that the great powers would act in *concert* rather than in competition with one another. That presupposition had been the basis for Franklin D. Roosevelt's early and somewhat crude concept of the "four policemen," and it carried over into the more sophisticated planning for the United Nations and the organization of the postwar international economy that went on during the last two years of World War II. It is certainly true that the United States expected to lead the new world order; it alone was in a position to set the rules and to provide the resources without which that system could hardly function. But the system was to have been based upon the principle of what we would today call *common* security. It was to have operated, at least insofar as the great powers were concerned, within a framework of consent, not coercion; and most Americans expected, perhaps naively, that this relatively open and relaxed form of hegemony could be made to coincide with their own security interests.

The United States plan for the postwar world, however, was never fully put into effect. Part of the reason was the United States' failure to take into account the extent of wartime devastation in Europe, and the consequent improbability that a return to open markets alone could solve that problem. But the main difficulty lay more in the realm of geopolitics than economics: it was that Washington's conception of common security ran up against another set of priorities, emanating from Moscow, of a profoundly different character.

#### STALIN AND THE SOVIET UNION

There was nothing relaxed, or open, or consensual about Josef Stalin's vision of an acceptable international order; and the more we learn about Soviet history now that the Soviet Union itself has become history, the more difficult it is to separate any aspect of it from the baleful and lingering influence of this remarkable but sinister figure. One need hardly accept a great man theory of history to recognize that in the most authoritarian government the world has ever seen, the authoritarian who ran it did make a difference.

Stalin was, above all else, a Great Russian nationalist, a characteristic very much amplified by his non-Russian origins. His ambitions followed those of the old princes of Muscovy, with their deter-

[2] The best recent discussion of American postwar planning is Melvyn P. Leffler's deservedly prize-winning *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992, especially pp. 1-24.

mination to gather in and to dominate surrounding lands. That Stalin cloaked this goal within an ideology of proletarian internationalism ought not conceal its real origins and character: Stalin's most influential role models, as his most perceptive biographer, Robert C. Tucker, has now made clear, were not Lenin, or even Marx, but Peter the Great and ultimately Ivan the Terrible. His rule replicated the pattern of earlier tsarist autocracies identified by the great prerevolutionary Russian historian, V. O. Kliuchevskii: "The state swelled up, and the people grew lean."[3]

Now, if the Soviet Union had occupied, let us say, the position of Uruguay in the post-World War II international system, this kind of autocracy certainly would have oppressed its citizenry, but it would not have caused a Cold War. If the Soviet Union had been the superpower that it actually was, but with a system of checks and balances that could have constrained Stalin's authoritarian tendencies, a Cold War might have happened, but it could hardly have been as dangerous or as protracted a conflict. If the Soviet Union had been a superpower and an authoritarian state, but if someone other than Stalin had been running it—a Bukharin, for example, or perhaps even a Trotsky—then its government would have been in the hands of a Kremlin leader who, although by no means a democrat, at least would have known the outside world, and might have found it easier than Stalin did to deal with it on a basis of wary cooperation instead of absolute distrust.

Unfortunately, none of these counterfactuals became fact. Stalin was in command, and the people of the Soviet Union, together with the rest of the world, were stuck with him at the end of World War II. That was a tragedy, if not in a classical sense, then in an all too modern one. Let me try to illustrate why with a series of vignettes based on some of the new information we have about the great autocrat's life:

Stalin, we are told, once kept a parrot in a cage in his Kremlin apartment. The Soviet leader had the habit of pacing up and down in his rooms for long periods of time, smoking his pipe, brooding about God knows what, and occasionally spitting on the floor. One day the parrot, having observed this many times, tried to mimic Stalin's spitting. Stalin immediately reached into the cage and crushed the parrot's head with his pipe, instantly killing it.[4]

Stalin once had an independent-minded wife who was becoming concerned about the repressiveness of his policies. After she argued with him one night, either he shot and killed her, or—more likely—she shot and killed herself.[5]

Stalin once had a rival, Trotsky, whom he outmaneuvered, exiled and eventually had killed; he also killed everyone he could who had ever been associated with Trotsky or any other potential challenger, as well as hundreds of thousands of other

[3] Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941*, New York: Norton, 1990, pp. 17-23, 60-64, 276-82, 482-86. Kliuchevskii is quoted on p. 22.

[4] Ibid., p. 147.

[5] Ibid., pp. 215-17. See also Dimitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, ed. and trans. by Harold Shukman, New York: Grove, Weidenfeld, 1991, p. 514.

people who had never had anything to do with any opponents of his regime. Some three million Soviet citizens died, it is estimated, as a result of these purges.[6]

Stalin once had an idea: that in order to finance the industrialization that Marxist theory said had to take place before there could be a Marxist state, the Soviet government had to ensure a reliable supply of grain for export by forcibly collectivizing agriculture. The best estimate is that over 14 million Soviet citizens died from the famine, exiles, and executions that resulted.[7]

Stalin once presided over the fighting of a great war, in which at least another 26 million Soviet citizens were killed. When it was over, he congratulated himself not only on a great victory, but on the impressive territorial gains victory had brought. "Stalin looked at it this way," his foreign minister, V. M. Molotov, later recalled. "World War I has wrested one country from capitalist slavery; World War II has created a socialist system; and the third will finish off imperialism forever."[8]

My purpose, in reciting this litany, is to make the point that the United States and its allies, at the end of World War II, were not dealing with a normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill, statesmanlike head of government. They confronted instead a psychologically disturbed but fully functional and highly intelligent dictator who had projected his own personality not only onto those around him but onto an entire nation and had thereby, with catastrophic results, remade it in his image.[9] And he had completed that task, I might add, long before the Cold War policies of the United States could possibly have given him an excuse to do so. The twentieth century has been full of tragedies, but what Stalin did to the Soviet Union and, let us not forget, to its neighbors as well, must surely rank as among the greatest of them.

## SO WHAT?

One might justifiably ask at this point, though: so what? Weren't Stalin's sins fully apparent decades ago, and didn't they figure prominently in the earliest orthodox accounts of Cold War origins? Isn't raising this issue now a matter of beating a horse that has not only long been dead, but is mummified, possibly even petrified? There are several reasons why I think this is not the case, why the nature of Stalinism is an issue to which

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[6] Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 486.

[7] Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 306.

[8] Albert Resis, ed., *Molotov Remembers. Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev,* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993, p. 63. This comment echoes a more famous one quoted long ago by Milovan Djilas: "The war shall soon be over. We shall recover in fifteen or twenty years, and then we'll have another go at it." *Conversations with Stalin,* trans. by Michael B. Petrovich, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962, pp. 114-15. World War II casualty figures are from Volkogonov, *Stalin,* p. 505.

[9] Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives,* New York: Knopf, 1992, pp. 360-62, provides a clear explanation, based on psychiatric literature, of why paranoia need not be functionally disabling. On Stalin's intelligence, see Volkogonov, op. cit., pp. 225-36.

Cold War historians will need to return.

First, archives are important, even if all they do is confirm old arguments. The new Soviet sources, however, may well do more than that: the evidence now becoming available suggests strongly that conditions inside the U.S.S.R., not just under Stalin but also under Lenin and several of Stalin's successors, were worse than most outside experts had ever suspected. Whether one is talking about the death toll from collectivization, the purges or the war; whether one considers the brutality with which the survivors were treated; whether one evaluates the economic and ecological damage inflicted on the territories in which they lived; whether one looks at what the Soviet system meant for other countries that got sucked into the Soviet sphere of influence—whatever dimensions of Soviet history one looks at, what is emerging from the archives are stories more horrifying than most of the images put forward, without the benefit of archives, by the Soviet Union's most strident critics while the Cold War was still going on.[10] That is, in itself, significant.

But there is a second reason why I think a reconsideration of Stalinism is in order, and it has to do with the way American historians of the Cold War have for too long thought about that conflict. They have preoccupied themselves primarily, as one might have expected, with the so-called First World, where most of the archives have been open for years. They have frequently challenged each other, quite correctly, to extend their horizons to include the Third World, and to give full attention to the often intrusive impact the United States has had on it. It is odd, though, that with all of their emphasis on the need for a genuinely international perspective, historians of United States foreign relations have made so little effort to understand what was really happening in—and what the impact of American policies was on—the Second World.

This omission resulted, in part, from inaccessibility. It was difficult to find out much because governments in the Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe and other Marxist states kept so much so carefully hidden. Part of the problem also had to do, I suspect, with the lingering effects of McCarthyism: the ideological excesses of the late 1940s and the early 1950s so traumatized American academics that for decades afterward many of them avoided looking seriously at the possibility that communism might indeed have influenced the behavior of communist states. Because some charges of Soviet espionage were exaggerated, there was a tendency to assume that all of them had been, that the spies were simply figments of right-wing imaginations. Because gestures like Congressional "captive nations"

[10] I owe this point to my Ohio University colleague, Steven Miner. One controversial departure from this pattern is J. Arch Getty, Gábor T. Ritterspoon and Viktor N. Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Prewar Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence," *American Historical Review*, October 1993, pp. 1017-49. The bulletin and working papers of the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington provide an extremely useful service in monitoring and evaluating new information from Soviet, East European and Chinese archives.

resolutions appeared to be a form of pandering to ethnic constituencies, it was easy to lose sight of the fact that there really were captive nations. And perhaps some of us also worried that if we talked too explicitly about these kinds of things, we might wind up sounding like John Foster Dulles, or, for a more recent generation, Ronald Reagan.

There was another problem as well, though, that made it difficult to assess what was happening in the Second World. It had to do with an unfortunate tendency, derived from international relations theory, to accord equal legitimacy, and therefore more or less equal respectability, to each of the major states within the international system, while ignoring the circumstances that had brought them into existence and the means by which they remained in power. Because all nations seek power and influence, or so realist and neorealist theory tell us, it was not too difficult to conclude that they did so for equally valid reasons; that reasoning, in turn, led to a kind of moral equivalency doctrine in which the behavior of autocracies was thought to be little different from that of democracies.

This was not, to be sure, a universal tendency. Many Cold War historians have long argued that certain Third World autocracies held power illegitimately, and have vigorously condemned U.S. foreign policy for putting up with them. But not everyone who took this view was willing to grant equal attention to what those few citizens of the Second World who were free to speak had been saying all along during the Cold War, which was that communism as it was practiced in the Soviet Union really was, and had always been, at least as illegitimate and repressive a system. Now that they are free to speak—and act—the people of the former Soviet Union appear to have associated themselves more closely with President Reagan's famous indictment of that state as an "evil empire" than with more balanced academic assessments. The archives, as noted earlier, are providing documentary evidence for such an interpretation. And yet, these developments have not visibly altered the historians' actual preoccupation with the First World, their periodic exhortations to give greater emphasis to the Third World, and their corresponding neglect of the Second World, which badly needs the historiographical equivalent of an affirmative action policy.[11]

A truly international approach to American diplomatic history, I should think, would be one fully prepared to look into the mirror that Williams wrote about to see whether we have given adequate attention to a tragedy that has had the most profound consequences—extending over more than seven decades—for the largest nation on the face of the earth, and for most of the other nations that surrounded it.

### THE RODNEY KING QUESTION

What would that mean, though, for the writing of Cold War history? The most

[11] For a critique of an earlier version of this article that illustrates my point eloquently, see Bruce Cummings, " 'Revising Postrevisionism,' or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History*, Fall 1993, pp. 539-69.

persistent issue historians of that subject have had to wrestle with is a variant of what we would today call the Rodney King question: couldn't we all have gotten along if we had really tried? The question was answered long ago with respect to another great dictator, Adolf Hitler: few people today have any difficulty with the proposition that Nazi Germany really did represent absolute evil, and that there was never any possibility that, if only we had tried, we could have gotten along with so odious a regime.

Nevertheless, American diplomatic historians have made, and still make, the argument that the United States should have undertaken a greater effort than it did at the beginning of the Cold War to "get along" with the Soviet Union.[12] They have tended to reject the notion, popular during that period, that Stalin was another Hitler, that what had evolved in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe was not communism at all, but rather "Red Fascism." It is true that the Soviet autocrat did differ from his German counterpart in several important ways, not the least of which was that Stalin was more cautious than Hitler and would back down if confronted with the fact or at least the plausible prospect of resistance. Nor did Stalin ever seek the systematic extermination of an entire people: the Holocaust was, and remains, unique.

But as Robert C. Tucker and Alan Bullock have recently shown, the similarities between Stalin and Hitler far outweigh the differences.[13] These were both remarkably single-minded leaders, driven to dominate all those around them. They combined narcissism with paranoia in a way that equipped them superbly for the task of obtaining and holding onto power. They persisted even in the most unpromising circumstances; and although capable of tactical retreats, they were not to be swayed from their ultimate objectives. They were extraordinarily crafty, prepared to take miles when inches were given them. And, most important, they both had visions of security for themselves that meant complete insecurity for everyone else: we have long known that Hitler killed millions in pursuit of his vision, but we now know that Stalin killed many more.[14] It is really quite difficult, after reading careful studies like those of Tucker, Bullock, and also the Russian historian Dimitri Volkogonov, to see how there could have been any long-term basis for coexistence—for getting along—with either of these fun-

[12] The most recent major study to take this view—even as it acknowledges the repressiveness of Stalin's regime—is Leffler, op. cit., especially pp. 98-99.

[13] This paragraph summarizes several of the major arguments of Tucker, op. cit., and Bullock, op. cit. Tucker makes the similarities explicit on pp. 591-92 of his book; Bullock's entire book deals with them, but see especially pp. 347-52 and 726.

[14] Charles Maier estimates 20 million state-sanctioned deaths not resulting directly from military operations in the Soviet Union and its occupied territories between 1926 and 1953. His comparable figure for Germany and its occupied territories between 1933 and 1945 is 7 million to 8 million, which includes 4 million to 5 million Jews killed in the Holocaust. See *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 74-75. Alan Bullock gives the figure of 18 million "victims of Nazi brutality in the whole of Europe," including between 5.6 and 6.9 million Jews. See *Hitler and Stalin*, [cont'd]

damentally evil dictators. One was dealing here with states that had been reshaped to reflect individuals; but these individuals, in turn, were incapable of functioning within the framework of mutual cooperation, indeed mutual coexistence, that any political system has to have if it is to ensure the survival of all of the parts that make it up.

The tragedy of Cold War history, then, is that although fascism was defeated in World War II, authoritarianism—as it had been nurtured and sustained by Marxism-Leninism—was not. That form of government was at the apex of its influence during the last half of the 1940s, even as the Soviet Union itself lay physically devastated: material conditions alone do not explain everything that happens in the world. As a result, Stalin was able to create or inspire imitators whose influence extended well past his own death in 1953.

Stalin's clones appeared first in Eastern Europe, where he installed regimes so scrupulous in following his example that they conducted their own purge trials during the late 1940s, a decade after the "Leader of Progressive Mankind" had shown the way. His influence was still present in that part of the world four decades later, as the careers of Erich Honecker, Nicolae Ceausescu, and their counterparts abundantly illustrate. Stalin certainly provided a model for the third great autocrat of the twentieth century, Mao Tse-tung, who it now appears had no interest in cooperating with the United States when he took power in China in 1949.[15] Despite his differences with Stalin's successors, Mao was still emulating Stalin himself when he launched the ill-conceived "Great Leap Forward" in 1957, a program of crash industrialization that is now believed to have cost the lives of some 30 million Chinese, a civilian death toll that may be higher than what Stalin and Hitler together managed to achieve.[16] And then there were all the little Stalins and Maos who appeared elsewhere in the world during the Cold War: Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, Fidel Castro, Mengistu Haile-Miriam, Babrak Karmal, and many others, each of whom, like their teachers, promised liberation for their people but delivered repression.

Now, tyrants—even well-intentioned tyrants—are nothing new in history. Cer-

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[14] [cont'd] op. cit. pp. 808-9, 989. But Bullock's total presumably includes the direct victims of German military operations; Maier's does not. Robert Conquest's estimate of Soviet citizens who died as a result of collectivization and the purges is 17.5 million. See *The Harvest of Sorrow*, p. 306; and *The Great Terror*, pp. 485-86. But his figures do not include, as Maier's do, deaths in Soviet-occupied territories after 1939. Dimitri Volkogonov places the total for Stalin's victims, excluding all war losses, somewhat higher, at 19.5 million to 22 million. See *Stalin*, op. cit., p. 824. A maximum estimate of Hitler's noncombatant victims, then, would fall well short of half the minimum estimate of Stalin's.

[15] See, on this point, Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, pp. 13-33, which is based on important new evidence from Chinese archives.

[16] Basil Ashton, Kenneth Hill, Alan Piazza and Robin Zeitz, "Famine in China, 1958-61," *Population and Development Review*, December 1984, 613-45. I am indebted to John Mueller for this reference.

tainly the United States associated itself with its own share of repressive dictators throughout the Cold War, and had been doing so long before that conflict began. But there was something special about the Marxist-Leninist authoritarians, and it is going to be important for post-Cold War historians to understand what it was. They were, like Hitler, murderous idealists, driven to apply all of the energies they and the countries they ruled could command in an effort to implement a set of concepts that were ill-conceived, half-baked, and ultimately unworkable. They believed that, by sheer force of will, all obstacles could be overcome, and they were willing to pay whatever price was necessary in lives to overcome them. These were not hard-nosed realists but rather brutal romantics; that does not justify us, though, in romanticizing any of them.

#### REDISCOVERING KARL MARX

But just what was it about the twentieth century that allowed such romantics to gain such power during its first eight decades, and then so abruptly, at the end of the ninth, to lose it? After all, the great authoritarians were not alien visitors; they sprang from circumstances not of their own making, and they rose to preeminence by taking advantage—with astonishing skill and persistence—of the situations that surrounded them. History for a long time was on their side, and then it ceased to be. We need to understand why.

One way to find out might be to follow another piece of advice from William Appleman Williams, which is that we rediscover Karl Marx.[17] It was Marx, more than anyone else, who alerted us to the fact that there are long-term, "substructural" forces in history, and that they shape modes of economic production, forms of political organization, and even social consciousness. To use a term from more recent discoveries in the geological sciences, Marx exposed underlying "tectonic" processes that drive history forward, in much the same way that comparable processes push the continents around on the face of the earth. These forces by no means determine the actions of individuals, but they do establish the environment within which they act. "Men make their own history," Marx emphasized in his famous 1852 essay, "The Eighteenth *Brumaire* of Louis Bonaparte," "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."[18]

We have neglected Marx's approach to history, I believe, for several reasons. First, we too easily confused Marxism with Marxism-Leninism, which was as thorough a perversion of Marx's own thinking as one can imagine. Second, Marx's incompetence as an economist, which was considerable, obscured his strengths as a historian. Third, Marx himself weakened his historical analysis

[17] William Appleman Williams, *The Great Evasion: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of Karl Marx and on the Wisdom of Admitting the Heretic into the Dialogue about America's Future*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964.

[18] Quoted in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 595.

by falling victim to what we now recognize as the Fukuyama fallacy: this is the curious tendency of those who think that they have identified the ultimate "engine" of history to assume that history will stop with them.[19] Marx insisted that the progression from feudalism through capitalism to socialism and communism was irreversible, but that it would then for some reason end at that point.

What really appears to have happened is that one set of tectonic forces—industrialization, the emergence of class-consciousness and the alienation that flowed from it—undermined liberal, democratic, bourgeois, market capitalism late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, thus paving the way for fascism, communism and the authoritarianism that accompanied them. But during the second half of the twentieth century these tectonic forces took on new forms—postindustrialization, the emergence of communications-consciousness and the alienation that flowed from it—which then undermined the foundations of authoritarianism and brought us around to our next historically determined phase, which turned out to be liberal, democratic, bourgeois, market capitalism all over again. Marx, it seems, had mixed up linear with cyclical processes in history, and that was a substantial error indeed. But it does not invalidate his larger insight into the existence of tectonic forces and the role they play in human affairs. That insight might well serve as a starting point for a reconsideration, not just of the Cold War, but of the twentieth century as a whole.

The great authoritarians of this century arose, from this perspective, because they were to turn historical tectonics to their own advantage: they were able to align their own actions with deep substructural forces, and thus convey an appearance of inevitability—of having history on their side—in most of what they did. With the passage of time, though, the historical tectonics shifted, the authoritarians' successors were unable to adapt, and they themselves became demoralized, with the result that their regimes collapsed very much as the dinosaurs did once the environment within which they had flourished no longer existed. One might even conclude from this that the Cold War's outcome was predetermined, and that the real tragedy of Cold War history was all the wasted effort the opponents of authoritarianism put into trying to bring about what was going to happen anyway.[20]

It is unlikely, though, that Marx would have taken this position, for despite his emphasis on underlying historical forces, he was no historical determinist. The authoritarians arose, he might well have argued, because a few key individuals made their own history by exploiting the circumstances that confronted them, circumstances that, at the time, presented them with immense possibilities. It was the *intersection* of

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[19] Named, of course, for Francis Fukuyama, who inauspiciously chose the summer of 1989 to publish a widely read article entitled "The End of History?" *The National Interest* Summer, 1989, pp. 3-18.

[20] I am indebted to one of my students, Philip Nash, for suggesting this point.

action with environment that produced results, not action alone or environment alone. But once one admits that possibility, one also has to allow that the resistance to authoritarianism may have made a difference. It makes no sense to claim that dictators can exploit tectonic forces, but that their opponents can never do so. So let us consider the resistance to authoritarianism, and that gets us back to the actions the United States—and its allies—have taken in the affairs of this century.

If, as seems likely, the twentieth century is remembered as one whose history was largely shaped by the rise and fall of authoritarian regimes, then historians will have no choice but to debate the role the United States played in resisting them. They may conclude that the role was an active one: that the Americans harnessed tectonic forces even more successfully than the authoritarians did; and that after a protracted struggle the Wilsonian vision prevailed over those of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and their imitators. Or historians may see the American contribution as a more passive one: that it was one of holding the line, of providing evidence that authoritarianism need not be the only path to the future, until such time as the underlying tectonic forces shifted, thus undermining authoritarianism's foundations and bringing about the events we have recently witnessed. Or historians may find that the truth lay somewhere in between.

But whatever the direction these lines of interpretation eventually take, the role of the United States in resisting authoritarianism will be at the center of them. It would seem most appropriate, therefore, for historians of American foreign relations to be at the center of that debate. I see little evidence of that happening, though, and I wonder if this is not because those of us who work in this field have allowed Williams' "tragic" perspective to obscure our vision. We have turned a set of criticisms that might have been appropriate for particular policies at a particular time and place into something approaching a universal frame of reference. We have transformed what was, in its day, a profoundly unorthodox criticism of conventional wisdom into an orthodoxy that has now become conventional wisdom. Like most orthodoxies, it does not wear well; it distorts our understanding of our place in the world, and also of ourselves.

How often do we ask the question: tragedy as compared to what? Gaps exist, after all, between the aspirations and the accomplishments of all states, just as they do in the lives of all individuals; if they alone are to be our criteria for defining tragedy, then that is a characteristic inseparable from human existence, which rather weakens its analytical usefulness. If one defines tragedy according to the *extent* of the gap between aspirations and accomplishments, it becomes a more fruitful concept. But if one then compares gaps in terms of their extent, setting the American record against those of other great powers in the twentieth century, the tragedy appears more to fade out than to stand out. Perhaps that is why the United States is still the preferred destination of those who seek to leave their own countries in the hope of finding better lives: the truly oppressed

normally flee away from their oppressor, not toward it. If historians are to take the voices of the oppressed seriously, we will need to listen to everything they are telling us, not just those parts of it that fit our preconceptions.

Americans are no more likely to be exempted from tragic processes in history than anyone else is; but historians have treated these processes in a shallow, shortsighted and antiseptic way. We need to regain a sense of what real tragedy, in this less-than-perfect world, is all about. That means comparing the American tragedy with the others that surrounded it. It means using history as a genuine way of learning, not simply as a convenient platform from which we hold forth, either in self-condemnation or self-congratulation. It means, in the most fundamental sense, meeting our obligations as historians, which involve being honest not only about ourselves but about the environment in which we have had to live. And it means according equal respect, as I fear we have not yet done, to all of the survivors, and to all of the dead.


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